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Intelligence agencies vital to U.S. security

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The American intelligence effort, always a lively subject, has recently received much media coverage, generally critical in tone. This serves only to confuse a difficult subject beyond the comprehension of even well-informed Americans. It may help to stand back and view U.S. intelligence problems in the light of some unchanging characteristics.

A historical review can then relate these characteristics and qualities to the current situation, and provide guidelines for better understanding.

Asymmetries

Serious strategists continuously search for asymmetries — those unalterable factors that grant a major advantage or dictate a major disadvantage to either of two contestants.

Our asymmetry in the intelligence field can be stated as follows: The United States, which is the most porous, least security-conscious nation and, in turn, tends to treat all intelligence as a dirty game, is the one nation above all that needs a continuous flow of accurate and timely intelligence. This need stems directly from our basic national policy of containment toward the Soviets and from our basic national military policy of deterrence.

These policies place us routinely in a reactive, not aggressive, posture. In this situation, national intelligence is inescapably our first line of defense. Not so for the Soviets. They are the most closed, security-conscious society and recognize all intelligence as a way of life. Moreover, with their basic policies of worldwide pressure and cautious opportunism, their actual need for intelligence is less acute than ours.

Fragility

Intelligence agencies are fragile, both in terms of their manpower and in terms of the policy and financial support granted them by the president, Congress and the American people. This support must be constant, quiet and more than simply adequate. It must be maintained at a level above the bureaucratic haggling and nit-picking that govern most resource allocations; and the inter-



nal use of this support must be the basic prerogative of the intelligence agencies themselves, of course with essential oversight by a small group of informed members of Congress and the executive branch.

Our national intelligence efforts require only the best people. Almost by definition, they must be intelligent — not just efficient and not just adequate, but the best. Fortunately, the important early leaders of our intelligence programs — "Wild Bill" Donovan, Gen. Walter Bedell Smith and Allen Dulles — recognized this necessity and recruited a remarkable group of talented, able men.

U.S. intelligence requires not only the best people, it also needs the most positive protection both legally and institutionally for them. Under current policies and conditions they do not have this full measure of protection; it should be provided.

It is timely to note one little-known fact about our intelligence people. On the whole, the CIA and other intelligence agencies have done a superb job in screening, recruiting and retaining excellent people. To public knowledge, only one traitor (Phillip Agee) has disgraced the CIA; he now languishes in Libya, deprived of U.S. passport and citizenship. Unfortunately, a few other employees, some at high levels, have permitted a desire for dollars or media attention to skew their judgment and have come forth with distressing books, statements and actions. But, when measured in terms of the many thousands involved, our intelligence people have been remarkably dedicated, efficient and trustworthy.

Man and machine

A balanced intelligence program is targeted at both the man and the machine — in intelligence jargon, humint (human intelligence) and technical intelligence. Translated: In a totally hypothetical situation wherein Chernenko and Gorbachev are playing golf, our technical intelligence people would turn their capabilities to finding out the type and capabilities of the instant communications they used; our humint people would want to get hold of the caddy to find out what they talked about.

This is not an either/or situation. Our national need is for both types of intelligence; there is no way that technical intelligence alone will suffice. As a nation with an almost childlike faith in technology, this necessity for a human balance may come as a bit of a shock to us; but it is a real necessity. The big problem is that humint involves us in covert operations that automatically encounter our deep-seated moral and psychological barriers, plus a potential for an undue degree of Congressional oversight, control and leaks.

Question: How covert is a covert operation when current procedures require that not less than 27 members of Congress and 34 staff and administrative personnel be advised of the planned operation before it occurs — and this in the leakiest of all capitals?

Excesses and failures

A continuing concern of our people and our national leadership is that there be no excesses or failures in our intelligence operations and that our operations be conducted in accordance with high moral standards that are not offensive to our national psyche. This is an admirable and understandable concern, but highly unrealistic.

One must recognize that in our democratic society, any intelligence system is automatically an excess.

"Gentlemen do not read other men's mail." Thus spoke Secretary of State Henry Stimson during World War I. Much of that lofty attitude still remains, so U.S. covert operations are judged guilty until proved innocent.

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